

First, let me thank you all for allowing me to speak today and especially the Chair and our Delegate Danny Marshall. Folks from my part of the Commonwealth are very familiar with him and fortunate to have him represent us in the House of Delegates.

I just wanted to take a few minutes to outline the blight situation that my city, Danville, is facing and how we've dealt with it, how we're continuing to deal with it and what we hope to do in the future, and how you all may be able to help in that regard.

Danville was once a bustling city known for its textile mills and robust tobacco markets. But globalization, demographic changes and, ultimately, a national recession caused our city to substantially shrink in population from 1990 to 2010. Now in the past five years, we've stabilized that population decline and even seen some encouraging signs of future growth. As mentioned earlier in this meeting, millennials and empty nesters are flocking to more urban environments with walkability factors. We've seen this in Danville with our downtown River District. In the past few years, the population in that district has gone from 200 people to over 2,000 and growing. With that being said, we are still faced with a critical problem, that is blight. We have far more homes than we do people ready to move into them. In addition to this, we have a rapidly aging housing stock. Over 50% of the homes in Danville are 50 years old or older. Many of these are old mill

houses that are not suited for modern use. Some homes, however, are still desirable to those who are willing to put the time and effort into bringing them back to life. Often times, though, they are discouraged by the amount of red tape, tax liens and hurdles that stand between them and restoration.

In the past few years, Danville has taken an aggressive approach to combatting this blight issues plaguing our city. More than \$5 million has been spent on Danville's blight eradication program since 2012. Of the 2,000 blighted structures in our city, we are only able to demolish roughly 100 per year. Clearly, we cannot demolish our way out of this problem. That is why we've embarked on a number of other solutions, among them being a full-time attorney that was hired to move demolition and maintenance code cases through the multiple steps they must take to be approved by a court. A rental inspection program was set up — and has already been expanded once — to force landlords to bring deteriorating buildings up to code. A program also was set up to help landlords get low-interest loans to make the repairs.

More recently, a receivership program was set up, allowing the Danville Redevelopment and Housing Authority to purchase derelict houses to either demolish or repair, as well as any adjacent vacant lots. These were the first steps towards a Land Banking program, and the reason why I am so pleased to see this issue being discussed today. A Land Bank Authority in Danville can help achieve a range of smart growth goals — such as facilitating infill development, spurring economic investment, and

preserving open space.

Where the state can come in and help us in this regard is by creating a framework that gives localities the flexibility to craft a solution that is best suited for them. Because what works for parts of Hampton Roads may not be applicable in Northern Virginia, and what is best for Northern Virginia may not be feasible in Danville. But by creating legislation for Land Banks and Land Trusts in Virginia, you would be giving localities the tools they need to combat blight and ultimately, turn some of these properties back over to the private sector for beneficial use. One of the things I've envisioned for the city I represent is the creation of an online auction system that allows for some of these blighted properties to be up for sale to the public to the highest bidder, predicated upon conditions being met, such as having the property up to code within a certain amount of time and actively seeking a tenant, as a way to prevent these properties from being bought and sat on, which is what led many of them to this condition in the first place. Programs such as this would help the taxpayers save money, while helping to eliminate blight at the same time.

In closing, I'd ask that you seriously consider joining the 13 other states that have passed some form of Land Banking legislation that allows the flexibility to overcome many of the financial and legal barriers that might discourage

responsible, private investment in neglected properties, such as clouded titles, years of back taxes and costly repairs. It would be a great benefit to the City of Danville and, I imagine, many localities across our Commonwealth. Thank you.